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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the notions of lifelong learning and lifelong learners within a social perspective. In order to illustrate this social perspective, the need for lifelong learning, factors affecting the lifelong learner, and the characteristics of the lifelong learning population are discussed. Educational and program implications are provided that should be helpful for program developers to take into consideration while making decisions about future educational programs. The viewpoint is offered that to achieve the goals of a learning society, challenged by rapid progress and new knowledge, two elements must be present. First, it is necessary that the related culture place a value on continued learning in order to improve the quality of life. And second, that educators who plan educational programs make use of their students' accumulated life experiences in their approach to designing education for lifelong learners. (Author/JD)

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University of Pittsburgh

Curriculum and Supervision

LEARNING NEVER ENDS:

NEED FOR LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMS

Freddy O. Di Paula

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present the notions of lifelong learning and lifelong learner within a present day social perspective. In order to illustrate this social perspective, the author will discuss the need for lifelong learning, factors affecting the lifelong learner; and the characteristics of the lifelong learning population.

The author will then provide educational and program implications that should be helpful for program developers to take into consideration while making decisions about future educational programs.

In the conclusion, the author states that to achieve the goals of a true learning society, challenged by rapid progress and new knowledge, two elements must be present. First, it is necessary that the related culture places a value on continued learning in order to improve the quality of life. And second, that educators who plan educational programs, make use of their students' accumulated life experiences in their approach to designing education for the lifelong learner.

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I INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present the notions of lifelong learning and lifelong learner within a present day social perspective. In order to illustrate this social perspective, the author will discuss the need for lifelong learning, factors affecting the lifelong learner, and the characteristics of the lifelong learning population.

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A. Lifelong learning

In America the land grant colleges (spawned through the 1862 Morril Act) were the first institutions that began offering extension courses in agriculture to farmers. Lifelong learning was established the moment that the educational institution became aware that people needed help in order to upgrade the knowledge they received in school.

The concept of lifelong learning is related to changes that were occuring in the last decade, especially among college students. College students were older in age and increasingly career oriented. As a consequence, state officials were encouraging institutions of higher education to provide education programs for this new clientele.

Evidence of the state's interest in non-traditional study can be seen in the incorporation of the concept of lifelong learning into legislation by the state of Pennsylvania; Pennsylvania is the only state that has taken such action. The Office of Special Programs was created within the Department of Education and in 1976 was renamed the Office of Lifelong Learning (Peterson & Associates, 1979).

Peterson and Associates (1979) define lifelong learning as:

> A conceptual framework for conceiving, planning, implementing, and coordinating activities designed to facilitate learning by all Americans throughout their lifetimes (p. 5).

In Gordon and Souza's opinion (1980), lifelong learning is not new:

> In one form or another some kind of continuing education of the lifelong learner has been around for a long time.... Today's highly complex society demands at least some post-secondary education; the rapidity of change, in turn, requires continuing, or lifelong learning (p. 1).

B. Lifelong learner

The concept of "lifelong learner" is associated with adult learners. The National Center for Educational Statistics (1978) defines adult learners as follows:

> Participants in adult education are persons beyond compulsory school age (17 and over) who are not enrolled full-time in a regular school or college program but who are engaged in activities or organized instruction (p. 286).

Different authors have defined lifelong learners in different ways; their opinions may vary in length and complexity. One concept is "adult learners that learn from experience and that are also active organized learners" (Gordon & Souza, 1980). A second more descriptive concept of the lifelong learner is presented by Allen Tough of the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education. He says that some 78 to 98 percent of adults are lifelong learners. They are "people who engage in a learning project, a highly deliberate effort to gain and retain a defined area of knowledge or a skill, or to change in some other way... (with activities) totaling at least seven hours **per week** (1979, p.9).

II SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

A. Need for lifelong learning

The active need for lifelong opportunities is mainly related to four aspects (Cross, 1978; Gordon, 1980):

1. The knowledge explosion has created a demand for people to know more and more.
2. The growth of organized and competitive learning options.
3. The notion of adult has changed to accommodate the idea of lifelong learning.
4. The fact that lifelong learning has become the focus of public policy.

B. Factors affecting the lifelong learner

The lifelong learner in America is a product of many different factors such as:

a. The educational forces triggered by the knowledge explosion.

b. Social forces (minority groups, women).

c. Life expectations (salary, job).

d. Overall economic contraction coupled with inflation.

e. Self-fulfillment needs.

f. Educational deficiencies in language and mathematics in a large and growing adult population.

g. Career change or upgrading.

h. Leisure pursuits.

For some lifelong learners, one factor is enough motivation to engage in learning. For others, the product of two or more factors is what leads them to further learning (Peterson and Associates, 1979; Cross, 1978).

C. Characteristics of the lifelong learning population

The pattern of enrollment is changing at the college level. The fact that the number and proportion of the student average age is well up in the twenties (if not older) gives this population definite characteristics. One study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (Oakes, 1976) shows that participation in adult education increased three times as much as the population. The principal characteristic of this population is that it consists mainly of part-time students. Today more than half of the community college enrollment nationwide is part-time, and the average age is over twenty years old.

Another characteristic of lifelong learners is that they are experienced persons in comparison to the conventional eighteen-year-old student. These lifelong learners bring with them a background that will vary according to their previous experience in life. Some of these experiences may be:

a. they have served in the army,

b. they have traveled,

c. they have raised a family,

d. they have balanced a budget of credits,

e. they have seen neighborhood changes,

f. they have worked in different kinds of settings,

g. they have worked under different kinds of pressure,

h. they have coped with various stages such as childhood, teenage problems, divorce, illness and death.

Another challenge of this population is related to learning modes. Usually their learning process is based on experience; they have learned a great deal experientially (often more than their college instructors), about psychology, economy, politics, etc. On the other hand, the school learning mode is different. It requires the development of an intellectual framework which is not always present when the learning has been accomplished mainly by everyday experiences (Peterson & Associates, 1979; Cross, 1978).

Another characteristic of lifelong learners is that they tend to develop learning processes by themselves; the learner manages his or her own learning (Gordon & Souza, 1980).

III EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The lifelong learner has a set of characteristics which require institutional responses unlike those normally associated with most colleges. In order to adapt effectively to this population, all components of operations should be considered (Penland, 1977; Oakes, 1976):

a. Admissions screening should include criteria such as motivation, career performance and previous experience.

Unnecessary testing should be avoided and mechanisms developed for identifying and separating test taking skills from subject mastery.

b. Administrative procedures such as registration and orientation processes require that the administrative offices should be open during evenings and weekends, allowing full-time workers to fulfill those requirements. On the other hand, some procedures and requirements should be revised, taking into consideration changes that may have occured in the last years.

c. Academic advisement, personal counseling, and financial aid advisement should be available for part-time students. Nationwide, many continuing education programs are designed to be self-supporting, thus forcing the adult, regardless of income, to pay fees for which no financial aid is available. To help the adult learner financially, colleges may also be prepared to devote some of their own resources to financial aid for part-time students.

d. The policies of creating and delivering academic learning should create ways of integrating formal and informal learning. Several enrollment options including movement from noncredit to credit and vice versa should be administratively facilitated to adequately meet the interests of the adult learner.

e. Faculty receptive to change is required in serving the adult, which implies a role transition from traditional teachers to mentors. To successfully accomplish this transition orientation, assistance and consistent organizational support should be available for the faculty.

IV PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

The increasingly diverse learner population requires that higher education diversify its goals, methods, and curriculum in order to meet the needs of this population. Programs for learners of all ages, informed by developmental perspectives and built on the rich traditions of liberal learning can enhance the growth of individuals and the improvement of society (Greenberg, 1980; Gordon & Souza, 1980). Institutions of higher education should become places to which learners of all ages can return again and again as new needs arise throughout their lives.

From a review of the literature done on papers and publications of the past ten years regarding principles for program design based on adult development and learning interest, the author has compiled a list of twenty organizing principles for program design. These selected principles focus on program goals, learning, program content, program processes, and special issues concerned with personnel and purposes.

Organizing Principles for Program Design

Aims and Goals

1. Programs should have as their aims both the acquisition of new knowledge and credentials and the enhancement of the "quality and meaning of life."

2. A match between program design and learners' developmental needs is essential to achieve "quality of outcomes." (Greenberg, 1980)

3. Programs can and should accommodate a "wide variety of learner motivations, life transitions, and developmental stages."

Learning

4. Change should be viewed as a precondition for learning. The most potent "teachable moments" for learning are periods of internal developmental transition and external marker event-generated transition.

5. In addition to insights gained from research and literature on adult development and learning, "our own lives" and those of our colleagues and friends hold significant indicators for program design (Knox, 1977).

Program Content

6. The external events and internal developments of adulthood have the potential to root educational programs in issues of major concern to students and can define the content of "liberal studies" (breadth), while career and vocational needs can define curriculum content for "areas of concentration or majors" (depth).

7. "Liberal career preparation and advancement are mutually dependent." Programs should meet learners where they are

and aid in the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for the future (Greenberg, 1980).

Program Processes

8. Programs must be "enabling and flexible" and should provide for maximum "individualization" of learning (Penland, 1977).

9. The wide diversity of learners' motivations and backgrounds require flexible approaches to "how, when, where and with whom" learning takes place. In particular, "time and calendar" are especially important variables in designing programs for adults.

10. Programs must be offered in convenient "locations" and appropriate "physical environments."

11. If education is viewed as a process and is on-going throughout life, then programs must be "process-oriented." Their methodologies should help persons learn generic skills which will be of value throughout life, such as planning, coordinating, selecting, communicating, decision making, critical thinking, value selecting, resourcing and confidence and competence building.

12. Programs built around processes which trust and rely on learners to be "self-directed and responsible" for their own learning, support growth and development and can lead to greater autonomy, competence and maturity.

13. Programs must provide for "theoretical as well as experiential" learning opportunities, in varied sequences, in order to meet younger and older adults' developmental needs (Greenberg, 1980).

Some Special Issues

14. Programs must find a balance between serving only middle-class learners of high competence, who exhibit life styles and values much like our own, and "taking risks with persons who are different." This principle rests on a belief in the human potential for change and growth through education. This population balance must insure high standards of achievement while providing avenues of access for persons who have been previously disenfranchised from the benefits of higher education.

15. The changing nature of women's lives and the high proportion of women returning to college require that programs account both for the "socialization effects and the value orientations of women," in order to meet the changing educational needs of adult women (Greenberg, 1980).

16. Programs should not negatively reinforce some traditional female characteristics and skills which have value for the entire culture, even as women seek "increased access and equity" in education and in the world of work.

17. Attitudes of "mutuality and shared learning" are necessary ingredients for successful relationships between program faculty, staff and students, in contrast to strict hierarchical relationships (Cross, 1978).

18. The ability to "take abuse and also say no" must be developed by adult program faculty and staff.

19. Faculty and staff must be alert to persons who view "institutions as objects to be manipulated" for their own private purposes and who may have little regard for the integrity of institutional missions and programs.

20. Faculty and staff must deal in sophisticated ways with basic developmental and philosophical issues which encompass the very meaning of life itself (Greenberg, 1980).

V CONCLUSION

The concepts of lifelong learning and lifelong learner are not new. The need for viewing these concepts in the light of a present day social perspective has become important due to the increased enrollment of adult learners who enter schools with different expectations from those of the "traditional" student.

It is not difficult to find examples of lifelong learners, historically. In the past, the main motivation may have been enlightenment, but today's lifelong learners feel the need to update their skills and knowledge in direct relationship to their work life survival.

If the challenge of adult learning is faced, it will constitute the foundations of a true learning society, "a culture that values recurrent and continuing learning as a means for enhancing the quality of life and for developing the skills necessary to cope

with the future." (Greenberg, 1980) For the lifelong learner, learning does not discontinue the normal flow of life. Furthermore, they perceive the learning process as a means for accomplishing personal goals. The fulfillment of these goals is part of the self-realization process.

Today's educators who plan programs must make use of their students' accumulated life experiences in designing education for the lifelong learning population. To aid program planners, more research about lifelong learning is necessary, as well as careful reviewing of the learning process itself. Research, to date, shows evidence that there are different approaches to learning, that learners discriminate on the basis of what is meaningful to them. Further research is needed on what modes of instruction are more adaptable to the lifelong learner.

Restructuring faculties and programs towards a better understanding of lifelong learners would be a meaningful step in accomplishing the goals of a true learning society. Colleges and universities need a fresh approach towards developing programs, because of the high probability that today's students will be lifelong learners. Only if this occurs will it be possible for America to build a true learning society.

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